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ABSTRACT

A sociocultural framework for examining the use of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Hong Kong is outlined and discussed. It incorporates or draws on concepts of the socio-historical nature of language, critical analysis of communication, and systemic-functional analysis of language use. Using this framework to analyze the current situation of English use in Hong Kong, it is concluded that many students in working-class schools feel they are being forced to learn English that is not needed for their studies or for their work in lower socioeconomic sectors of the local community. English, perceived as a language traditionally representing authority, is increasingly seen now as an authoritarian imposition, particularly when the ESL teacher is an expatriate. This situation is seen as detrimental to student motivation, and greater student choice is urged. (MSE)

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A SOCIO-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK FOR A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN HONGKONG

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Language is a meaning-making activity. It is in and through language that people make sense of their social reality, a social reality that includes their own identities as living individuals. This is to say that language is not simply a neutral, objective tool used for conveying social reality and individual identity in a detached manner.

The nature of language is such that it does not exist first as an objective instrument of communication outside communicative contexts, detached from the social settings in which it is used, and then picked up by the participants already engaged in social interaction who happen to feel that they need to use language in a particular moment of the social interaction, and who, at the moment of picking up the linguistic instrument, start to be language users. On the contrary, language is always already an integral aspect of the human process of construction of social reality, which necessarily includes the construction of the participants' own individual identities.

Thus, language as a social activity is always already a part of the continuous construction of social reality; language as a meaning-making activity is always already a part of the meaning being made. In this sense, language does not serve as a container for the transfer of meaning. Language itself is

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content; language is meaning.

Individuals participate in the construction of social reality, of meaning, in and through language. In the process of their constructing their own identities in such a social reality, specific meanings come to be attached to these identities that they construct for themselves. In this way, people are "mean-ers" in two senses: first, they take an active part in creating meaning; second, they are part of the meaning created.

It is therefore more accurate to call people participating in the linguistic process of meaning-making "languag-ers" rather than language users, and the linguistic process of meaning-making "languag-ing" rather than language use. Languag-ers, as participants in the meaning-making process, are mean-ers. As both creators of meaning and part of the meaning created, languag-ers themselves are also part of the content of linguistic communication.

Based on this perspective to language, this paper proposes a socio-cultural framework for a critical analysis of the use of English as a foreign language in Hongkong that will take into consideration both its broader socio-historical situation as well as its existence as lived experience at the individual level. The paper will review some of the concepts used by Mikhail Bakhtin for his socio-historical analysis of the nature of language, those used by Jurgen Habermas for his critical analysis of communication, and those used by Michael Halliday for his systemic-functional analysis of language use, and make suggestions on how these concepts can be integrated to form the basis of the socio-cultural framework.

Language as Heteroglossia

Bakhtin proposes the concept of "heteroglossia" to refer to the nature of language. He argues that language is not a static, unitary entity more or less successfully acquired by passive individual learners, but a dynamic process of social interaction and dialogic exchange. Language is a primarily sociohistorical, socio-cultural, collective phenomenon. The way people acquire language is inseparable from the way they acquire the capacity to know, understand, and experience reality in their immediate socio-cultural settings, which are themselves situated in broader sociohistorical currents.

Language as social interaction, as acts of language use in communication, exists as innumerable concrete dialogues between participants in social interaction. As an active medium in and through which the individual speaker interacts with other speakers in society, language can also be conceptualized as a continuous dialogue between the self and society. It is in this sense that Bakhtin claims that language is inherently dialogic. As the individual speaker participates in the dialogic process of linguistic communication with others, she experiences her own existence in communication, reflects on her own self, and at the same time becomes infused, in and through language, with the social contextuality and collective intentionality that permeate her socio-cultural environment. According to Bakhtin,

> "all of language turns out to be permeated with intentions, accented. For the consciousness that lives in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but a concrete heterological opinion on the world. Every word gives off the scent of a profession, a genre, a current, a party, a particular work, a particular man, a generation, an era, a day,

> and an hour. Every word smells of the context and contexts in which it has lived its intense social life; all words and all forms are inhabited by intentions" (Quoted in Todorov 1984).

In Bakhtin's view, language never has a singular or unitary existence. It is always a complex reflection, and refraction, of the multiple realities both constructing and constructed by individuals acting in and on their differentially lived experiences and understood meanings:

> "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated -- overpopulated -- with the intentions of others" (1981).

Language reflects and refracts the competing voices representing different interest groups in society. The competing voices are a result of society's members having differentially lived experience in their different positions in society's power relations, and language brings society's members together in one language community, in which individuals come to experience through the common language the meetings, negotiations, and clashes between society's competing interests.

It is in and through language that the individual speaker is connected dialogically with her social existence on the one hand, and with her psychological existence on the other. This language-mediated connection is maintained as a dynamic process, and is internalized as the speaker's "inner speaking consciousness", which is linguistically expressed in social interaction as the speaker's "voice". In the speaker's voice is expressed the individual speaker's sociohistorically determined cultural experiences internalized as her inner speaking

consciousness. As such, voice both represents and re-creates the collectively lived cultural, and therefore meaningful, experiences of historical memories, social relationships and personal feelings produced over time in social interaction.

People construct social reality and their own individual identities under determinate sociohistorical conditions. These sociohistorical conditions are reflected in the speaker's voice as already existing reality. At the same time, these sociohistorical conditions are refracted through the speaker's language-mediated act of understanding, which has the effect of defining these conditions as real, thereby contributing to the creation of the very social reality itself.

In a society characterized by relatively fixed relations of domination and subordination, language becomes imbued with internal contradictions reflecting, and refracting, the contradictions produced in society's power structure. These contradictions in language are expressed in society's competing voices not only in the form of oppositions between speakers' voices, but also, perhaps more importantly in the form of internal contradictions within the individual speaker's own voice. As an expression of the speaker's inner speaking consciousness, these internal contradictions within her own voice reveal the process in which the speaker strives to make sense of and eventually "comes to terms" with her lived experience in a complex web of multiple social realities and contradictory power relations. These contradictions are revealed in the speaker's utterances in communicative interaction with other speakers. They also exist in the speaker's reflection on her own self

experienced as internal psychological tensions.

In a colonial society, the language of the colonial power is invariably given higher social status at the expense of the indigenous language. This happens through the use of the colonizer's language in government and other public institutions such as education. The majority of the indigenous population first goes through a period of powerlessness, maintained by overt force if necessary, through being excluded from the colony's public arenas. In time, the colonizer's language, initially experienced among the indigenous population as an overt imposition from above, comes to acquire legitimacy and becomes a symbol of authority.

This happens through the social institution of education and other channels of socialization. In the process, the indigenous population is forced to publicly participate in the colonizer's institutional space in and through his language, relegating the indigenous language to a private, substandard existence. It has been argued that such a form of "colonial bilingualism" (Memmi 1965) creates people who possess not two mutually fertilizing tools of communication but a limited fusion of two cultural spaces resulting in both psychological tension at the personal level and cultural conflict at the societal level.

The relegation of the indigenous language and therefore the indigenous culture to a substandard existence leads to a form of "cultural mummification", and "mummification of individual thinking", which can be observed in the universal apathy among colonial peoples (Fanon 1963). The promotion of the colonizer's cultural values and the relegation of the indigenous, pre-

colonial culture to an inferior position through linguistic imposition and discrimination have led to what are referred to as "subtractive bilingualism" and "semilingualism". It is argued that these victims of colonization have less language, and are therefore less human.

Whereas these arguments might have a certain degree of validity in their specific socio-cultural contexts, it seems that they do not apply in the case of Hongkong. From the outset, it is quite legitimate to claim that Hongkong has never had a pre-colonial culture; that to the extent that Hongkong has developed an indigenous culture, it has always been a unique fusion of oriental and western values; and that the development of its unique, relatively self-conscious political identity is taking place in recent years in what is often referred to as Hongkong's post-colonial era.

On the language issue, it is possible to argue that Hongkong has never been entirely colonized by the English language. Most Hongkong people conduct their everyday life in and through the Cantonese language, one of the most popular varieties of Chinese language. The mass media are predominantly Cantonese (Lo & Wong). In the early 1970s, in order to attract viewers, advertisers put pressure on television stations to produce local programmes to replace programmes imported from the West. Cantonese is increasingly used in the court of law quite confidently by people who do not feel able to speak English. It is also regularly used in Legislative Council debates. An increasing number of English-speaking expatriates working in Hongkong have remarked that Hongkong as a whole is not really

bilingual, and that in Hongkong English is not a second language, but a foreign language.

Language as a dialogic entity is a two-way process. Rather than saying that Cantonese has been suppressed by English, it is also possible to claim that the English language has been localized through being appropriated by certain sectors of the local community. A wide variety of Chinese popular publications in Hongkong make free use of English words as well as Chinese characters representing English ones as they are pronounced. A large number of people in Hongkong make use of English expressions in their Cantonese conversations in everyday life.

Educationists and politicians have been pushing for more use of Chinese as the teaching medium. Many school pupils hold the same opinion, except that when asked to choose they themselves prefer schools using English as the teaching medium. Parents also object bitterly to their children's schools changing from using English to using Chinese as the teaching medium, believing that their children will suffer adverse effects in the employment market after graduation. Teachers of subjects other than English believe their pupils learn better in Chinese. Teachers of English, on the other hand, complain that the standard of their pupils' English is deteriorating because other subjects are not taught in English. In the meantime, many school pupils continue to flock to private English language tutorial schools and English language conversation clubs where they can participate in more informal learning of English.

Twelve years ago, a form-four pupil in a working-class school asked his teacher of English to explain why he as a

Chinese person was required to learn English. Three years ago, a lecturer of Chinese language in a local tertiary institution criticised, during an examination board meeting, the practice of conducting meetings in English, which discouraged less confident speakers of English from giving their opinion. Two years ago, a student interviewing for a place in a local tertiary institution asked, in her excellent English, for justification for conducting the interview in English, and insisted on being interviewed in Cantonese.

These are some of the competing voices on the language issue in Hongkong. They are often expressed in terms of the opposition between the English language and the Chinese language. Without going into a detailed analysis of the current situation, it is argued here that the competing voices reflect, and refract, the societal frustration and personal tension caused by the contradictory experience of language learning and language use in situations characterized by relations of domination and subordination, whether in school or the workplace. Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative action provides a useful starting point for a critical analysis.

Language as Communicative Action

Jurgen Habermas adopts a human ontological perspective to linguistic interaction that takes into consideration the general human capacity for critical discourse and rational problem solving as well as the very nature of knowing or understanding itself. He argues that making an utterance -- an act of language use -- in social interaction is a communicative action. To fully

understand the meanings of the utterance requires participation in the interpretive community in which the utterance is made. The participation involves making a judgement on the ontological and moral/practical validity of the rationales underlying the utterance. There is no external point from which the utterance can be understood in an absolutely detached manner.

The judgement involved in the process of understanding an utterance is made on the basis of community norms governing what counts as existentially relevant in relation to the objective, external environment; what counts as socially appropriate in terms of public morality as well as personal sincerity; and also what count as norms. In other words, to fully understand an utterance, it is necessary to consider three dimensions of its underlying validity: first, its existential validity, ie. the validity of the assumptions made in the utterance about the external world; second, its interpersonal validity, ie. the social appropriacy of expressing, through that utterance, particular assumptions about the external world; third, its expressive validity, ie. the authenticity and sincerity of the speaker's own feelings towards the utterance as a whole. The three dimensions of validity condition one another, and are judged holistically by participants in communicative interactions.

It is this engagement in judgement and critique of the language used in social interaction that makes it possible for someone to know, to understand, and to interpret the various dimensions of an utterance. The three dimensions of validity of an utterance: the existential, the interpersonal, and the

expressive, together with the linguistic aspect of the utterance, correspond with what Habermas calls the four "basic worlds" forming the ontological presuppositions of the participants in communicative interaction: first, a posited objective world shared by the participants; second, a social world through which one may relate oneself to that posited objective world, which includes the other participants; third, an inner world of the self; and fourth, the world of language.

Corresponding to these four basic worlds are four basic kinds of action: strategic action, normative action, dramaturgical action, and communicative action. These fours kinds of action are communicatively co-ordinated in different ways. Strategic action is concerned with identifying the most efficient means to given ends, and is judged in terms of the efficiency of particular means to particular ends. Normative action is concerned with the justification of action in terms of existing social norms, and is judged according to whether particular actions match particular norms. Dramaturgical action is concerned with the expression of one's views, beliefs, and feelings, and is evaluated in terms of the actor's personal sincerity. The fourth kind of action, communicative action, is concerned with the attempt to achieve an agreement on the definition of the actors' common situation, problems to be handled, and goals to be reached. Communicative action is evaluated in terms of the degree of actors' openness to new suggestions and their willingness to examine, and re-examine, their own basic values.

To achieve understanding of the meaning of an utterance

requires participation on the basis of the participants' ontological presuppositions concerning their own personal existence in relation to the external environment and to the social circumstances in which the utterance is made. Knowing or understanding is a dynamic process of participation in which the knower makes an act of commitment to the validity conditions underlying an utterance. Knowing and the actualization of oneself as knower are one and the same process. One does not become a knower first, and then go about the business of knowing. Moreover, knowing is not separate from the knower's feeling, but a process of feeling itself. There is no external point from which an utterance can be understood objectivistically if understanding means achieving an interpretation of the multiple dimensions of the utterance's meaning, ie. going beyond the mere dictionary meaning of the words used in the utterance.

The participants' capacity to see an utterance in its intricate relations with the posited reality of the external environment, the social reality of the interpersonal relationships involved, and their understanding of the self is referred to as communicative competence. Communicative competence is distinguished from mere linguistic competence in that the latter only involves an understanding of the surface, dictionary meaning of the words used in an utterance. It is therefore possible for someone with the necessary linguistic competence to understand the dictionary meaning of the words and sentences in the utterances made in social interaction, but find herself unable to participate communicatively as a result of her inability to interpret the communicative action involved.

In what Habermas refers to as the Ideal Speech Situation, the communicative participants are not under any constraints that might hinder free and genuine examination of the validity conditions underlying the utterances made. The participants in such an Ideal Speech Situation enjoy a symmetry of opportunity to use all the dialogic resources of language to move towards full understanding of each other's utterances, which includes understanding one another's existence in relation to the external environment and the social world. Having acquired the necessary communicative competence, these participants are capable of subjecting one another's actions to full critical scrutiny even though not all of them possess the power to make the final decision. Conversely, power asymmetries in the participants' communicative relationships may prevent open examination of the validity conditions underlying utterances, resulting in utterances being accepted on the basis of power rather than critical examination.

Relatively permanent, structural asymmetries in social relationships prevent certain social groups from fully participating in the communicative interaction, through which people construct their reality from their own existential interests and on the basis of their own values. Rather than taking a full part in defining their own social reality and individual identities through everyday communicative interaction, they come to accept the definitions provided by those in positions of authority. Permanent asymmetries in social relationships therefore lead to what Habermas refers to as "systematically distorted communication".

As an energy-economizing strategy, participants in such social relationships may even develop over time a preference for definitions of reality provided by institutional authorities, and for exact instructions on tasks to be given to them by those in positions of authority. These people, who find themselves locked in powerless positions, are more likely to find themselves developing a general incapacity to participate fully in defining their own reality, lives and values through unconstrained examination of the validity conditions underlying communicative actions. As such, they tend to be prevented from developing adequate communicative competence to handle, in a rational manner, the everyday social interactions they encounter. A consequence of such inadequate competence in handling communicative interaction prevents them from effectively co-ordinating other kinds of action.

It has been pointed out that the conventional classroom is one example of such relatively permanent asymmetries. Young (1992) points out that most classroom teachers tend to rely on authoritatively given information and explanation, and on pedagogic practices that encourage memorisation and imitation rather than critical understanding. Whether consciously intended or not, when the learner-teacher relationship is seen in terms of the ability to reproduce the teacher's views, the teacher's expert knowledge often becomes an obstacle to the learner's rational response. Even for subjects that require relatively more discussion and interpretation, such as literature, evaluation and criticism are seen to be related to personal tastes rather than social values. Without a general disposition

towards critical reflexion on the values underlying their own relationship, learnerss and teachers tend to construct one another as participants in an authoritarian interaction through classroom talk.

In the conventional Hongkong classroom, teaching and learning a foreign language tends to be perceived as a process of acquiring dictionary-level linguistic competence, with the meaning system of the language taken as fixed rather than continuously socially determined, and determining. The language teacher is expected to provide the linguistic skills, and the learner to follow by imitation. Learner participation tends to be confined to tasks designed to evaluate learners' success in meeting the teacher's requirement. Rarely are learners encouraged to participate in the process of negotiating for and making decisions on learning tasks from points of view that they find relevant to their own life experience. Such a kind of arrangement has produced nothing but bored pupils, and bored teachers who complain with a sense of resignation that their pupils are hopeless.

Individual students do nevertheless seek out ways to improve their English, bypassing their official teachers of English. In a local inter-school athletic meet ten years ago, a secondary school teacher of English was bored, hid behind some form-six students and fell asleep. Two form-six students from a class he did not teach woke him up, and asked if they could talk in English. The conversation went on for the entire afternoon, extending into the early evening as they left the atheletic ground and as they walked on public streets.

One month ago, a local third-year tertiary student attended a tutorial with her English language tutor assigned to help her with her academic English. The tutor commented on an eight-page article she wrote for a cultural analysis subject. The tutor's comments were that there were too many quotes and too much jargon in the article, and that the article was too long. Afterwards, the student talked to her cultural analysis lecturer about it. The cultural analysis lecturer asked the student why she had not explained the paper to her English language tutor. The student said that even if she had done so, the tutor would not have been genuinely interested. She believed that it was not worth the effort to put forward all the arguments to exchange for the simple expression "I see" from her tutor. She added that perhaps her English was not good enough.

These two cases illustrate that making decisions on the language learning tasks will inevitably involve making judgements on the relevance and efficiency of the tasks in relation to the goal of language learning, the norms involved in judging the social appropriacy of the tasks, and the personal values involved in placing oneself as participants in the tasks. All these decisions are communicatively co-ordinated. The learners may even want to get involved in the whole question of whether they should be learning English at all, and if so, for what purposes, how to achieve such purposes, and so on. To the extent that the learners are not linguistically competent to take part in such communicative actions, the teacher can step in to help. The central principle is to involve learners in negotiating on the language learning tasks and on the norms used in evaluating their

own performance, on the condition that these norms are eventually related to the norms of a wider community. On the basis of Habermas' arguments, this will lead to a situation in which learners will acquire communicative competence through developing their own individual voice.

Language as a Social Semiotic

Adopting a sociosemiotic perspective to the study of the way language functions in society, Halliday argues that the social system is a social semiotic, and that the semantic system of language is a realization of this social semiotic. Taking the social system as a social semiotic means conceptualizing society as a system of meanings that forms the culture's reality as lived out and experienced by its members.

This system of meanings is concretely realized in actual instances of language use, which is experienced by the language users themselves as forming part of their cultural reality. Actual instances of language use realize the culture's system of meaning through the relationships of correspondence between the functional components of the semantic system of language on the one hand, and the situational elements of the social settings in which language is used on the other.

Halliday refers to these functional components of the semantic system of language as "metafunctions", and identifies the major ones as the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual. The ideational function of language represents the "content" function of language, which in actual instances of language use expresses the speaker's perception, experience and

understanding of her social setting as well as her own consciousness of such perception, experience and understanding. With the semantic system of language conceptualized as a meaning potential realized through and embodied in actual instances of language use, the ideational function of language represents the speaker's potential to express linguistically her experience of the external world as well as her internal consciousness of that experience:

> "The ideational function represents the speaker's meaning potential as an observer. It is the content function of language, language as 'about something'. This is the component through which the language encodes the cultural experience, and the speaker encodes his own individual experience as a member of the culture. It expresses the phenomena of the environment: the things -- creatures, objects, actions, events, qualities, states and relations -- of the world and of our own consciousness, including the phenomenon of language itself; and also the 'metaphenomena', the things that are already encoded as facts and as reports" (Halliday 1978).

This concept of the ideational function of language allows for the conceptualization of the speaker's subjective expression of her own social existence as well as her own more or less conscious understanding of the nature of such an existence. Language use is conceived of as being constitutive of the speaker's experienced cultural reality. It is in and through languge use that the speaker lives out the experience of her own existence. It is in the process of communicating with other people that the speaker's subjectivity emerges. As the language user participates in language use, she is involved in constructing her experience of the reality in which she is a part. and at the same time in defining her own place in this

cultural reality.

The second sociosemiotic function of language identified by Halliday is the interpersonal, which refers to the speaker's potential to establish herself as a specific individual engaged in specific relationships with other speakers, to act on and in such relationships, and to influence these other speakers through linguistic acts:

> "The interpersonal component represents the speaker's meaning potential as an intruder. It is the participatory function of language, language as doing something. This is the component through which the speaker intrudes himself into the context of situation, both expressing his own attitudes and judgements and seeking to influence the attitudes and behaviour of others. It expresses the role relationships associated with the situation, including those that are defined by language itself, relationships of questioner-respondent, informer-doubter and the like. These constitute the interpersonal meaning of language" (Halliday 1978).

The third sociosemiotic function, the textual, refers to the speaker's potential to make use of the resources of the language to realize the ideational and interpersonal functions as situationally coherent and relevant discourse. In this sense, it has an enabling function:

> "The textual component represents the speaker's text-forming potential; it is that which makes language relevant. This is the component which provides the texture; that which makes the difference between language that is suspended in vacuo and language that is operational in a context of situation. It expresses the relation of the language to its environment, including both the verbal environment -- what has been said or written before -- and the nonverbal, situational environment. Hence the textual component has an enabling function with respect to the other two; it is only in combination with textual meanings that ideational and interpersonal meanings are actualized" (Halliday 1978).

These sociosemiotic metafunctions of language -- the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual -- are linked to three corresponding situational elements of the social context of language use: field, tenor, and mode. The concept of field refers to the ongoing social activity, the social action in which the use of language is embedded and for the purpose of which language is used. It includes the purposive activity of the participants and the subject-matter of the activity. The concept of tenor refers to the set of relevant social relationships and the type of role interaction among the participants in linguistic interactions. It includes, for example, levels of formality, the degree of permanence of the relationship, and the intensity of the emotion involved in it. The concept of mode refers to the role of the language used in the activity. It includes the channel (eg. whether written or spoken) and the genre selected, and is essentially the role that language is expected to play in the total structural context of the communicative situation.

The three metafunctions of the semantic system -- the ideational, the interpersonal, the textual -- correspond systematically to the semiotic structure of the social situation. Each of the three main areas of meaning potential tends to be activated by one particular aspect of the situation -- field, tenor, mode. The potential range of meaning of language as content tends to be determined by field -- the activity type; the potential range of meaning of language as participation tends to be determined by tenor -- the role relationships in the activity; and the potential range of meaning of language as texture tends to be determined by mode -- the role of language in the activity:

> "There is a tendency, in other words, for the field of social action to be encoded linguistically in the form of ideational meanings, the role relationships in the form of interpersonal meanings, and the symbolic mode in the form of textual meanings" (Halliday 1978).

Language acts conceived this way can be analyzed as acts of making choices from various possibilities that the language users feel are appropriate to the context of situation in terms of the interpersonal, the ideational, and the textual "metafunctions" of language (Halliday 1978; Halliday & Hasan 1986).

An implication of such a conceptualization of language is that language users' communicative potentials are to a very large extent inherent in the cultural settings in which the communicative participants find themselves, rather than being simply mechanical skills more or less successfully possessed by language users. The culture of a social group determines the "behaviour potential" from which its members can draw upon in choosing their acts, including language acts. This behaviour potential of the social group determines what its members can mean with their acts, ie. its "meaning potential". This meaning potential in turn determines the "lexicogrammatical potential" available to the group's individual members, ie. what they can say (Halliday 1978). The language behaviour of the members of a social group both realizes the group's cultural values and contributes to the continuation or change of the cultural values, with language presenting itself as a "structured structure" -- "the right thing to say", and as "structuring structure" -- "the right thing to mean" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bernstein 1981; Giddens 1991).

Language users acquire communicative competence considered

appropriate for a context of situation as they become socialized into its institutionally determined meaning potential through the internalization of appropriate discourse types. Moreover, a discourse "colonises" the social world, and produces appropriate "subjects" for the discourse (Kress 1989; Fairclough 1989), subjects in possession of certain social identities. A major function of language training is the construction of language users who are able to function appropriately in specific communicative interactions. This has been an implicit rationale behind various strands of development known as English for Specific Purposes (Allen and Widdowson 1974; Widdowson 1978, 1979; Hutchinson and Waters 1987).

The situation becomes problematized when language users required to internalize particular discourses and social identities come from backgrounds with very different cultural norms. Trainers of immigrant users of English as a second language have noticed that people may well choose to perceive themselves as incompetent second language users rather than participating in a communicative situation in which they have to risk adopting and accepting subordinate social roles. These trainers have advocated for viewing language as not merely a technical skill, but closely related to power and human relationships. They have also suggested that language training should include the provision of opportunities for learners to experience power in linguistic interactions (Cummings 1989; Sauve 1989; Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa 1976).

It has been suggested that "communication" ends when the participants disagree on the basic cultural norms governing their

language behaviour, and that "discourse" begins when the participants start to negotiate for changes in those norms. In a less than Ideal Speech Situation, however, the unequal distribution of social power, real or perceived, leads to communicative inequality and systematically distorted communication (Habermas 1970). Attempts have been made to create English as a Foreign Language curricula that include as their aim the development of learners' discoursal ability to criticize and to negotiate for changes through the use of English (Piepho 1981). By encouraging learners to share in social and political responsibilities through language behaviour, such curricula aim to produce language users who feel empowered and self-sufficient through the development of enhanced awareness of the social structural constraints around them and the development of their potential to act on those constraints. There are also suggestions to introduce critical language studies into all language education in school to develop pupils' ability to reflect on their own language experience (Fairclough 1989).

In the case of Hongkong, English has traditionally been a "second" language among local members of its social elites, and has been commonly perceived as representing authority. The education system and the professional sectors have recently become open to people from a much wider spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds. To most of these people, English is increasingly experienced on the personal level as a "foreign" language, and as increasingly representing authoritarian imposition. Changes in the broader political climate in Hongkong's run-up to 1997 do not but help reinforce such

feelings.

At the same time, as Hongkong changes from being based on industries requiring mechanical manipulation of objects to being based on industries requiring constant expression of personal opinions and negotiation on alternatives, foreign language curricula designed to train workers for the former type of society are likely to produce incompetent language users. Unaware of the changes in the discoursal basis of language use in work settings and unfamiliar with the emerging discourse types, these language users are more likely to experience communicative failures. Some of them attribute these failures to their inadequate grasp of the foreign language. Others come to associate these failures with personal inadequacy. Either way, unhappy workers who feel personally threatened and who gradually become less communicative are produced.

In their defensive attempts to avoid being exposed to potentially oppressive communicative situations, these unhappy workers are also likely to prefer simple discourse types that serve to give straightforward, mechanical instructions rather than those aiming for open expression of feelings and negotiation for change. Personal insecurity in professional settings involving the use of English as a foreign language, coupled with the broader political changes, tends to lead to communication blocks or even prejudices against other English language users. Paradoxically, in the name of efficiency, Hongkong's response has been to provide language training programmes that aim to familiarize potential recruits to the job market with even more simplified discourse types, which shows an ignorance of the

cultural factors involved in linguistic communication and their effects on the formation of occupational identity.

Concluding Notes

An analytical framework based on the conceptualization of language as heteroglossia, as communicative action, and as social semiotic can be drawn up to analyze the way language is used in specific situations in relation to the purposes language use is expected to serve, and in relation to the social identities of the individual participants involved. A similar framework can be used for the evaluation of language learning materials as well as language learning activities in relation to their efficiency in developing socially appropriate communicative competence.

The form-four pupil in the working-class school who queried the formal requirement to learn English twelve years ago has grown up; so has his classmates. Some of them found themselves working as welfare assistants and studying part-time for a formal social work qualification in a local tertiary institution. They fetl that they are being forced to study English language, which was not needed for their study, and definitely not needed for their work with members of the less well-off sectors of the local community. Their frustration was expressed as complaints against their local teachers of English for not talking in Cantonese to them outside class hours. When they had expatriate teachers, most of them left as soon as class was over. Meanwhile, in another local tertiary institution, a mature working adult trying to get a BSc degree was asked in an English language class what she expected from the course. He reply was that she did not have

any expectation at all, since the English language course was a compulsory one.

This situation should not continue, especially if it becomes seen to be an expatriate vs local issue. A critical analysis of the current situation, and attempts to help students feel that they have a voice of their own are urgently needed.

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